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ABSTRACT

This sociological perspective on multicultural education focuses on racial and cultural groups, but accents class and power correlates. The results of the civil rights movement took the nation to visions of integration, and when these faltered, to the recognition of diversity in the form of cultural pluralism, which nonetheless implies structural integration. Cultural pluralism as the focus of a solution for the problem of inequality has diverted attention from the need for structural change and access. In addition, cultural pluralism as a policy has encouraged multicultural education as a kind of cure-all for society's tensions and has served as a proof of commitment to democracy. At its best, multicultural education may create greater awareness and appreciation for people from all backgrounds, but it cannot effect the real changes needed to provide a just society. Nevertheless, if done correctly, it will have a more beneficial impact on education than did the previous focus on cultural pluralism alone. Multicultural education is the right thing to do, but it is only part of the enormous effort needed to achieve real equality. (Contains 5 references.) (SLD)

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Cultural Pluralism, Multi-Cultural Education, And Then What?

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(Presented to the National Association for Multi-Cultural Education, February 10, 1994, Westin Hotel, Detroit, Michigan)

Opening Remarks

My field is not education but sociology. Nonetheless, I hope that a sociological perspective on multi-cultural education will be of some value to this distinguished audience. Let me quickly spell out for you what my basic points will be in this talk. They are not dissimilar from many of your own, and especially the views of your distinguished President, Carl Grant. What I hope will be new is some of the content and analysis of the issues the points reflect.

First, while my focus will be on racial and ethnic groups, class and power correlates will be accented. Second, the results of the civil rights movement took us from desegration to visions of integration, and when the latter faltered, to recognition of diversity in the form of cultural pluralism -- which nonetheless implied "structural integration." What we actually witnessed was more emphasis on cultural expression and less on structural access. Cultural pluralism as the focus of solution for the problem of inequality deflected attention from the need for structural change and access. Third, what cultural pluralism as a policy did do, along with the negative pressures created by continuing racism/ethnism, was to encourage multi-cultural education as a kind of "cure-all" for the tensions of the society and to offer it as

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proof of our commitment to democracy. Fourth, multi-cultural education at its best, may create greater awareness and appreciation of all categories of people within and beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, and it may create a number of activists determined to make the wider society match the goals of multi-cultural education, but I do not think for the immediate future that it can effect the real changes needed to provide a truly or reasonably just society. It is part of the solution, but there are too many national and international factors which presently limit its full success. Fifth, even so, it will have a greater impact, done right, than the previous focus on cultural pluralism alone.

Analysis

Sleeter and Grant define the multi-cultural education approach as one that

> "...promotes cultural pluralism and social equality by reforming the school program for all students to make it reflect diversity. These reforms include school staffing patterns that reflect the pluralistic nature of American society; unbiased curricula that incorporate the contributions of different social groups, women, and the handicapped; the affirmation of the languages of non-English-speaking minorities; and instructional materials that are appropriate and relevant for the students and which are integrated rather than supplementary."[1]

They also identify another type that embodies the above, but adds an action dimension, i.e. the notion of multicultural education

actually preparing "students to challenge social structural inequality and to promote cultural diversity."[2] Others have phrased this somewhat differently by saying that

> "...if a democracy which includes all of America's people is to be fostered and prefigured in this nation's education system, then multicultural education must be at the heart, and not on the margins, of all discussions about education in this country. In this situation, multicultural education becomes not a matter of simply adding new material to the school curriculum, but of fundamentally re-visioning the relationship of schooling to a democratic society."[3]

What these cited definitions have in common is their focus on equality, that somehow multicultural education must create and promote. To understand what we are promoting, we need to define equality. In its absolute sense, equality means sameness of outcome. Without getting into a long discussion as to whether or not this is desirable, sameness of outcome would require a level of monitoring that a democracy would not find acceptable. Nonetheless, ever since the liberal age with its concept of citizenship and civil society emerged from the enlightenment, the idea of equality became a goal insisted upon by emancipated western society. How then can we define it? Here I am addressing myself to racial and ethnic groups but it could be applied to other categories as well. The following definition includes the social ingredients necessary to attain equality: a state of racial/ethnic equality exists in a polyethnic society when racial/ethnic groups

enjoy nondiscriminatory status (i.e. that they are valued positively at the human and cultural levels), are guaranteed those basic conditions of security and services which enable them to secure credentials to their abilities (equality of condition), and actually have unimpeded opportunity to compete for positions of power and class that have the authority to shape the conditions of life. This will still lead to inequality, but it will meet the terms of the spirit of equality, i.e. that the criterion of fairness is operative. This means that whoever falls to the bottom of class and power will do so from a relatively equal playing field; they will be statistically spread throughout the populations rather than centered in particular groups; and they will not be left without the basic securities from which their children can mount their effort to rise in the system. I will return to the concepts of status, class, and power, as well as the notions of equality of condition and opportunity later in this analysis.

The same definition of equality holds for interstate relations, but requires agreements first between states, especially North/South states, and second, within the separate states themselves. This is a much more complex process and requires no less than a reordering of the world politically, economically, and socially. This will not happened without great resistance, and it may be utopian. Even so, it offers clear direction for the future. And here, I hasten to add that multi-cultural education must therefore include internationalization of education to its approach.

To assess the prospects of attaining the spirit of equality as I have defined it, and to have multicultural education serve as a lead into, and support of it in our own society without neglecting the international scene, we need to examine what we mean by western liberalism, the birth-mother of modern, universal citizenship rights. Advocates of the latter allege that it alone is able to achieve democracy and hence by association, equality, especially since the failure of state socialism in the former USSR.

First, we need to understand what the western liberal model is. Actually, there are basically three western liberal models of equality. The first is the assimilation/universalist model which came out of the enlightenment tradition and is now enshrined in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[4] It is based on the assumption that the state constitution and laws recognize universal humanity and guarantee the same rights as such to all citizens to pursue their goals, that equal opportunity is therefore one of the rights which derives from universality and constitutionally guaranteed equal rights, and that participation in the societal structures will assimilate all citizens to a common world view and experience, thus eliminating any basis for negative differentiation. In short, people will be judged individually on their own merits because they are subject to universal criteria.

The second is the protection of minority rights as individual groups in polyethnic states model which was given content and focus after World War I through the League of Nations and the Minority Protection Treaties and Declarations.[5] It was seen as an

extension of liberal concepts of rights to freedom of expression. The basic assumption in this model is the right to protection and resource support by the state of all individuals as members of specific minority ethnic nations to retain their culture, language, religious practices, and identity without jeopardizing their status, access to power, and economic opportunity and mobility in the state of citizenship. This model insisted on the liberal value of freedom of expression in group form and the right to one's own identity. "Forced" acculturation/assimilation (the first model) was seen as a violation of their rights. Nonetheless, they were also to be guaranteed the same opportunities as other citizens of the state. Other citizens and state officials saw this as special privileges for ethnic groups who wanted resources to continue their separate cultures, schools, and languages while not forfeiting the general privileges of citizenship. This was supposed to be a positive form of separate but equal, i.e. separate culturally and somewhat structurally as well, and yet equal in terms of citizen access to positions in the wider society. Post-World War I Europe saw these treaties as a solution to the way states with various ethnic nations were formed. The treaties never really worked and some of the ethnic problems in Europe date back to these untenable arrangements.

Third, the structural integration/cultural pluralism model was developed by such thinkers as Horace Kallen.[6] It is a variation of the rights to freedom of cultural expression whereby ethnic group members are guaranteed equal access to the common economic,

political, and social structures of the polyethnic state, while at the same time being allowed and encouraged to pursue, develop, and elaborate their own ethnic cultures freely but not guaranteed fully by the resources of the state.

The problem with some of the contemporary liberal polyethnic states (the United States included) is that they often adopt unconsciously more than one of these models in full or partially and in an incoherent manner which may further exacerbate ethnic discontent. For example, in this country we use the first model when we deal with law, i.e. equal treatment before the law which in fact does not work if only because of differential resources of the defendants. More, we use the cultural pluralism model (model three) in a negative way, i.e. when an Arab (especially a Muslim), commits a crime, he/she is translated communally - ie. all Arabs are bad. When Congressman Kennedy met with constituents who were speaking to Palestinian rights in the M.E., he was quoted by a constituent in the group as saying, "they [the Arabs] killed my father." Sirhan was translated into a "they, the Arabs." This is not so for mainstream whites. More recently, President Clinton addressed a Black Church in Memphis to condemn violence. Although not conscious of his actions, he chose a Black Church to speak about violence, implying that African-Americans are the group that need to be approached about the problem, rather than to a white population. Nonetheless, cultural pluralism is still put forward as positive while those who are members of a non-majority culture are treated negatively. They were before before the cultural

pluralist model, but cultural pluralism makes them more visible and objects of criticism for their alleged "special treatment," especially when "they" behave deviantly.

The protection model (model two) was produced in this country as negative Jim Crow laws, and they envisioned total separation with access only to menial positions in the wider society and inferior separate institutions. Today, the protective part of this model was theoretically embodied in affirmative action laws more as catch-up than guaranteed protection (entitlement), but in fact affirmative action, while benefiting some, has been gradually circumvented. In part, bilingual education derives from this model.

On the whole, however, we have the ideology of the first model of individual equality before the law, coupled with cultural pluralism which is put forward positively, but used negatively, and the perceptions on the part of some in this society that in the second model, various racial, ethnic, and gender groups have privileges not available to others. This is why we have a mess today.

Well, okay, we have cultural pluralism as the dominant mode of relating to diversity in this country, and we are supposed to get structural access under this policy that leads to some equality. Affirmative action and equal economic opportunity are supposed to help us achieve the latter. Multi-cultural education is supposed to help prepare us for this new equality, or it is even supposed to help create it. But what do we have?

Our capitalist economic order is based on inequality. The question becomes one of who gets on the bottom? Because of the

limited number of top positions, whoever could be kept out of the competition allowed others greater opportunity. Whether by intent or by opportunity, women, especially of color, and various racial/ethnic groups as categories were disproportionally found on the bottom. If the spirit of equality operated, the bottom would not be consistently inhabited in a disproportional way with particular racial/ethnic groups and women of color. When the post-civil rights legislation aimed at achieving integration to change this situation went into effect, it was challenged by sectors of society. And in and of itself, in any case, it could not meet the demands for equity by trying to put more players into the same structure, and one in which there is a shrinking job market. Hence, the focus shifted to cultural pluralism as a policy, not simply as a recognition of right to expression, but to deflect attention from the failure of structural integration. Good money was available for arts, dance, folklore, etc. to which the committed went. This made people feel good. These programs were good for self-esteem, but very little money was available for structural change to absorb people. Even so, cultural pluralism gave appearances of respect.

Therefore, even when members of deprived groups got into positions of "power," economic or political, they were captive leaders. Who could imagine a Colin Powell using his previous position with the joint chiefs of staff to put forward the agenda of African-Americans on such matters as their disproportional death rate in Vietnam. Can anyone really imagine Ron Brown presenting an unambiguous picture of African-American economic and health

issues. No Arab-American can ever envision George Mitchell or Donna Shalala coming out forcefully for real justice in the M.E. which is tied to viewing Arab-Americans positively in this society. Or who could imagine Connie Chung doing a speak-out on Asian-Americans, especially those from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Lani Guinier was refused the post of U.S. Civil Rights Attorney because she did not have the credentials for being a captive leader. She was considered a "trouble-maker" because she held to her values. All of us know of at least one feminist, or an African-American, or an Hispanic-American, etc. who are defined as radical or aggressive in their views who are refused jobs because "they would not be good for our students, or co-workers, or organization." Take your pick. I myself have been locked out of teaching courses on the Middle East, my area speciality, because I believe in including the point of view of the victims as well as the victimizers in the area. None of my colleagues offered support on this matter. In short,the few who climb to the top as proof of American democracy, are absorbed into the existing corporate culture. They are not able to change the structure in ways that allow cultural pluralism to mesh with social and political mobility.

To further dissect the situation in detail, I must now examine the dimensions of inequality, class, status, and power, and then I will tie the parts of my analysis together.

Class Stratification. When members of particular ethnic groups in a polyethnic society (and/or the global system of nation-states) are consistently in the low-income and high unemployment

category, it becomes obvious that certain social and political processes are re-enforcing the pattern and that equal access is not a reality.

Social Status. This is often defined simply as a person's or group's position in society. Defined in this way, social status elicits little affect. However, if we understand that social location is a result of how a group is perceived by others, then we will understand social status to include other meanings. The social status of a racial/ethnic group is a derivative of the degree to which the group is valued in society in human and in cultural terms.

Ordinarily, to evaluate a group negatively in human terms correlates significantly with a negative evaluation in cultural terms. African-Americans, Native-Americans, and various misnamed Hispanic-Americans illustrate this point. On the other hand, positive evaluation, even if given grudgingly, of an ethnic group in cultural terms may neutralize overt negative human evaluation. For example, the European cultural values of education and achievement which Jewish immigrants brought with them to the United States tended to subdue, but not defeat overt antisemitism (the human level of their status evaluation) in this country over the years. Positive cultural evaluation provided Jewish peoples with the opportunity to achieve higher ranked positions in society.

In the first case, the double negative evaluation of a racial/ethnic group not only defines its social position, but correlates

significantly with class. In the second case, latent negative human evaluation has the potential for surfacing under certain conditions. However, the cultural skills and achievements of the affected group offer a constraining factor and permit the group an overall desirable social status as well as greater class mobility.

In sum, an ethnic/racial group's status position is determined by the human and cultural evaluation made by those who "count" in society, and that these evaluations are relevant to economic access and degree of class mobility, and as we shall now see, to power positions as well.

Power. There are several types of power in addition to the obvious one of political power. There is economic power supplied either by ownership of significant shares in firms or property; there is bureaucratic power stemming from managerial positions in major organizations and agencies; and there is social power stemming from the prestige and authority of professional roles.

Ordinarily, ethnic/racial groups who are doubly negative evaluated do not have easy access to positions of power. Hence the only real power route open to doubly negative stereotyped groups is to organize the group itself to develop a critical mass capable of "disrupting" society in some form. In return for ceasing and desisting, agreements with governmental and institutional officials are made calling for attempts to alter the negative images through public education, enactment of laws to gain economic access, and greater efforts to open power positions.

Those ethnic groups negatively stereotyped humanly but not culturally are able to gain positions of power by exercising their citizens' rights and meeting necessary qualifications in the "open" society. However, the more power they gain in all areas, even in the "open" society, the greater the possibility for the latent human prejudice to express itself, especially in situations where the society as a whole is undergoing difficult economic times. While the ethnic group is able to rally through their institutions important forces and resources against attempts to dislodge them from their class and power position, the hostility toward them is expressed quite often through acts of violence, but civil society rushes to condemn such violence against groups who are culturally valued. Clearly, the type of status evaluation of ethnic/racial groups tends to correlate with class and power positions.

The next questions we must ask are what is the solution, and what does multi-cultural (including international) education have to do with it? Can multi-cultural education produce equality? What other forces are operating that may neutralize the intent of multi-cultural education?

It seems to me that multi-cultural education works on improving the status dimension of inequality which supports the notion of cultural pluralism but does not touch structural issues of class and power for those who are doubly negative evaluated.. While it does sometimes focus on class and power issues, the reality of the American social structure tends to dampen the activists as they compete in a shrinking opportunity structure. What we need to make

multi-cultural education work are equality of condition and opportunity mentioned in my definition of equality. Although we have been on the periphery in this country of establishing equality of condition, i.e. the recommendation of the Social Security Commission of 1935 that a policy of guaranteed employment be put in place so as to avoid the catastrophe of the great depression; the development of a minimum wage law - though very inadequate -; some unemployment coverage; low-cost housing, etc, we have not seen these add up to even minimal maintenance of excluded peoples, never mind basic security to "level" the playing field. We have to have equality of condition, i.e. guaranteed work at a level of pay that is livable, clean and decent low cost housing, health care, first class education for all without bias, reasonable support for the unemployed and handicapped, etc. Only equality of condition will make equality of opportunity meaningful and produce the spirit of equality. These met, multi-cultural education's focus on creating positive status (human and cultural) could work toward achieving the spirit of equality. However,the three liberal models would have to be reformulated into a single, conscious and positive model. Actually, this would mean that the universalist model could operate in treating people individually for jobs, political office, and before the law. The cultural pluralism model would allow positive cultural identity without interfering in universal criteria for access to the economic and power structures. And it is assumed that the protection model would not be needed if multi-cultural education and equality of condition and opportunity worked

well together. All of this requires fundamental change in our society calling for a socially responsible capitalism and government. Such changes assure identifying and promoting our best into all walks of life from all walks of life, while assuring those who do not attain the positions of great income and power in society, a real cushion of security from which their children will have an opportunity to compete.

These are yet not enough. We have to move to greater international agreements and equity. We need real peace and recognition of the rights of third world peoples not to be used as cheap labor. They must be guaranteed security as well. Profits must be put into a human context that includes not only people's basic securities, but de facto will also cease the destruction of our environment beyond earth's ability to replenish the resources necessary for life. So long as we remain in a competitive national and international economic mode which relies on political and military power to control people and resources as well as control international financial institutions, polyethnic states with the most excellent multi-cultural education will not be able to sustain in reality the values of equality promoted in school.

What this all means is that a NAFTA would not be enacted, and hence would not pit American labor against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in a racist/ethnist battle for jobs. It means that a World Trade Center explosion would not direct hatred to Arab-Americans and other Muslim groups in America. For even if we ever get equality of condition and opportunity, and we could work out

the problem of liberal models, we must ask if multi-cultural education focused on creating positive human and cultural statuses can work when national and international events and policies are enacted that can immediately wipe out its effects. One need only think of the treatment of Iranian-origin peoples in the United States after the Khomeini revolution and the holding of American Embassy workers as hostages in Iran for over one year that led to hostility to Iranian-origin people in the United States.

Some ninety years ago, Emile Durkheim thought he could promote moral behavior in our modern industrial societies through education; and we still keep trying through liberal arts. Thankfully, we do turn out a basic core of students who keep the embers burning, but the reality is before us. I hope that multi-cultural education will be more successful. It is the right thing to do, but we need the rest of society and the world, or those who make decisions in those arenas to walk with us. Given the fact that most people live in polyethnic states and within a competitive global economic system, the efforts required to achieve the spirit of equality are enormous and complex, but the goal is worth our very best efforts.

1. Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant, "An Analysis of Multicultural Education in the United States", Harvard Educational Review, 57:4, November 1987, p. 421. This definition is the most popular of the five they identify from the literature they examined systematically.

2. Ibid, p. 422.

3. Theresa Perry and James W. Fraser, "Reconstructing Schools as Multiracial/Multicultural Democracies: Toward a Theoretical Perspective," in their Freedom's Plow, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 3.

4. Geoff Dench, Minorities in the Open Society: Prinsoners of Indifference, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986, discusses this model and its problems.

5. Jacob Robinson, et al, Were the Minority Treaties a Failure?, Institute of Jewish Affairs, New York, c. 1943 discusses this model and its problems. Also see R. Sampat-Mehta, Minority Rights and Obligations, Canada Research Bureau, Ottawa, c. 1973.

6. Horace M. Kallen, Culture and Democracy in the United States, Boni and Liveright, New York, 1924 presents one of the original conceptualizations of this model.